



Marketing Legal Services On The Deepening, Splintering Web

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Five years ago, law firm web strategy for most firms I encountered consisted of the following statement: “Yes, we have a website”. If a firm could check that box, most felt they had done their duty and could get back to the more important work of practicing law. No longer.

The last half-decade has seen us move from a prevailing standard of mere existence online to a new framework where the firm website now forms the backbone of many firms’ marketing efforts, irrespective of firm size. Looking ahead, I see increasing emphasis on three broad areas: content, conversations and search engine visibility.

The Evidence Is In

The growing importance of the online environment for the legal world has paralleled its ascendance in other industries (see: music, news and more recently book publishing as examples of the larger trend). Additionally, a body of evidence has accumulated specific to law that supports shifting priorities towards a web-dominant marketing focus. See, for example, a recent [research survey on corporate counsel new media engagement](#) from Greentarget Strategic Communications or Greenfield Belser’s [Digital Marketing 2010](#) for detailed insights on what sophisticated purchasers of legal services are now doing online.

Deepening

With the landscape rapidly evolving, we have seen a maturation of what constitutes a “good” law firm website. Matt Homan of Lexthink LLC gently satirized both [law firm websites](#) and [lawyer bios](#) recently with a pair of venn diagrams that underscores a common weakness of the genre – sites and bios built for what lawyers think they should be rather than what clients are actually seeking. That led to an excellent reply from Robert Ambrogi on [The Art and Science of Lawyer Bios](#) in which he refines Homan’s critique by asserting that much of the “standard” bio information (law school attended, Martindale-Hubbell ratings, etc.) that Homan impugns is in fact still relevant to clients. Ambrogi asserts that the real sin with lawyer bios is that they lack personality, life, vibrancy and interest. Both Homan’s diagrams and Ambrogi’s blog post have been well circulated online and the lively discussion about them evidences a growing awareness of the importance of lawyer bios and a sincere interest in improving them.

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More sophisticated strategies are also emerging amongst the most engaged firms towards website analytics and search engine optimization. Slaw's own Steve Matthews recently provided a detailed post on tactics for [search engine optimization on a practice group level](#). This sort of granularity and detailed behind-the-scenes work on specific key elements of the firm website is not yet the norm, but it's where we are headed.

Splintering

Additionally, many firms are extending their visibility and online reach beyond their websites. Some of the more common vehicles to achieve this now include:

- Blogs;
- Listservs;
- Gated online legal communities (think Legal OnRamp or Martindale-Hubbell's Connected)
- Document portals (JDSupra)
- Video (Youtube); and
- Social media sites (chiefly LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook).

A small handful of firms have also launched iPhone apps, and more are expected soon. Many other firms are wrestling with just how many and which of these "extras" are worth their while. It's an important question, and one that is not amenable to glib or one-size-fits-all answers.

Now What?

So where does that leave you today in terms of priorities, and where things are heading? Despite the web's growing complexity, I believe the path to success for lawyers online is ultimately growing at least clear, if not easy. In my view, firms can position themselves for online success by thinking about the web in three parts:

- 1. Content**
- 2. Conversations**
- 3. Search**

Content: More than ever, content is king. Saying you are leaders in a certain area or type of practice is no longer sufficient. Clients now want to see it for themselves,

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first-hand in the form of direct links to your judgments, articles, blog posts, case studies, peer-review rankings and other validating source material. You must demonstrate that you have done exactly the kind of work they need doing, that you've done it for clients in their industry, and that you are eager to help them solve their issues. The type of empty prose that made [anonymous law firm](#) an all-too-successful caricature of the genre a few years back is going to wane in favour of a more transparent approach to surfacing the real work product and personalities of your firm. This is the deepening component, and much of it will, or should, reside primarily on firm-controlled web properties including the firm website and blogs.

Conversations: While firm websites are critical, it is also becoming clear that they are no longer sufficient in and of themselves, for the simple reason that they are largely structured as one-way communication vehicles – the firm broadcasts information and clients (hopefully) consume it. However, a significant amount of your target audience's time online is spent in places other than your website – on social networks, on industry portals, on listservs and blogs. The common element is that these are communities where *dialogue* and multi-party communication takes place. Your lawyers need to go and meet the clients where they are online, be involved in these conversations, adding value, putting a human face on the firm, generating visibility and demonstrating an awareness of and involvement in the issues relevant to your client's industry. Where appropriate, you can then use these channels to guide interested parties back to the relevant original content you have available on your own web properties. This is the realm of social media, blogs and gated online legal communities. This kind of engagement also typically leads to increased speaking opportunities and interview requests in relevant trade press. The specifics of which channels you use and how many of them your firm participates in will be decided on a firm-by-firm basis, but the need to engage on some level is a reality that more and more firms will be addressing in the near future.

Search: Search visibility has not been prioritized for many mid-sized and large firms in the past, but it is gaining traction. While firms would love – and frequently ask for - a magic bullet solution that immediately lands them atop the Google results for any and all possible search terms, the reality is that attending to the content and conversation mandates outlined above will be the best first path to improved search rankings for most firms. Targeted, in the trenches work of the kind outlined in Steve Matthew's SEO for practice groups piece can then be effectively used to extend search visibility even further, but it is extremely difficult to build significant search engine presence when there's no "there" there. Good

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search results have their foundation in deep content and multiple inbound links to your sites from a variety of third-party web properties that search engines recognize as credible and relevant to your industry.

To summarize then: Provide substance. Take it to where your clients are. Then seek to make sure others like them can see it too. Plus ça change. . .

About the Author:

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